

Honorable Judge Leonie Brinkema,

My name is Tracy Kuehner and I am a Technical Sergeant and paralegal in the United States Air Force with 11 years of service so far. I am currently stationed in Norway. Christopher Kuehner is my big brother and I understand what he was charged with and found guilty of. I know that the decision in front of you is not easy and I hope that this letter will help you better understand my brother.

My brother and I grew up as military kids, which meant having to worry when we'd have to uproot our lives and start over again. Therefore, our family unit was very important. I'm sure that if my brother looked back on our childhood, there wouldn't seem like much to complain about. We always had food on the table, toys to play with, and a roof over our heads. But it's taken me a long time to really understand the environment that we grew up in and see how it's affected us. I do not say this to hurt my parents because they did the best they knew how, but internally things always felt emotionally unstable. Our dad did his best to be the most supporting and loving dad, even though he was always gone to sea when we were children. By the time that our dad retired and was home more, my brother was in the Army. Our mother was the biggest cause of the emotional instability that we grew up in. Her emotions were unpredictable to us, and she did not provide much emotional support. I can count on one hand how many times I've heard my mother tell us she loved us, and I can't even think of a time that she said that she was proud of us. We constantly had to navigate ourselves around her potential reactions and deal with the outbursts and what often felt like emotional manipulations, which is still something that we deal with as adults. She constantly criticized us growing up and she was very controlling. Through the constant criticism, we only heard "we weren't good enough," I don't think my brother understands completely how this part of our childhood affects us, as I've only come to this realization over the last few years. Our childhood taught us that we had to deal with our problems and emotions alone, especially paired with the old school parenting, "don't cry over spilt milk," parenting style that my parents employed.

Aside from what he has been convicted of, my brother has always been the best big brother. Chris is four years older than me, and he has always been protective of me. He always wanted me to be the strongest and smartest. He would teach me things he was learning in school, so I was already ahead of the curve. When my brother joined the Army, the U.S. was already at war and while, overall, the structure and friends my brother made was good for him, I know that the Army changed him. My brother suffers from PTSD and he doesn't talk much about it or how it affects him. That is in part because of how we grew up, but also because the military in years past has been critical of those with mental health issues. Through the years after he separated from the Army, I learned of only a few things he saw and experienced while deployed. I know he lost a very good friend in a helicopter incident while doing medical evacuation, as the cable in the helicopter broke and my brother's friend fell to his death. I also know of the time he held a little kid in his arms while the child died, during which my brother knew he couldn't do anything to help but had to push down what he felt and get back to helping others who were hurt. Thinking back, I don't think I even heard of these stories from him, but from others who knew about his experiences because I don't think he ever wanted me to see him as "weak".

I feel as though my brother's life changed significantly in the years after the Army and not for the better. While my brother was in the Army, he met his ex-wife and had my niece. After he separated from the Army, his family fell apart. My brother was very effected by the divorce and only being able to see his child a few weeks out of the year because he lived on the opposite side of the country, but that never stopped my brother from trying to give my niece the world and doing everything he could to make her happy. My brother had a great job working at the Department of the Navy in the local shipyard, which he lost sometime around 2018/2019. While things seemed to be looking up as he worked on his degree, his life became more isolated with most of his interactions with others being limited. His biggest joy came from helping not just his friends, but his fellow veterans. When COVID took over the world and everyone was in lockdown, I think that was when my brother suffered the most. Understandably, everyone struggled during the initial lockdown and even the months of restrictions after; and Washington State, I know, had very restrictive conditions well into 2021. Taking away my brother's ability to see his family, his friends, and his ability to help people, placed him in a position where he would be alone with his thoughts and the pain that he's been avoiding for years. Growing up I always admired that my brother could move on so quickly from the bad things; as an adult this is his downfall, as he avoided facing his issues, getting help, and moving forward in a healthy way. I think this situation has made it clear to my brother that he needs to face his issues and embrace help so that he never finds himself in a situation like this again.

Aside from COVID, 2020 was extremely difficult for our family. In January 2020, my family and I noticed that my mother was having a hard time keeping on weight and she would complain about the taste of food and eat very little. By March 2020, prior to the worldwide lockdown, my father, mother, and I were in Japan. I remember distinctly seeing how much weight my mother had lost and convinced her to see a local military doctor. He was concerned for her and wanted to have her come back for tests but mentioned that she could potentially have cancer. Before we could come back, we unexpectedly had to return to the U.S. because of COVID. Once she returned to Washington it was a fight for months to try and get her seen, even with the looming possibility of cancer. This took a toll on our family, not knowing if she had cancer and slowly watching her physically waste away. Eventually, she was able to see a doctor and they found out she had a thyroid issue and started medication to control it; but even as the months went on, she didn't seem to be getting better. In November 2020, my mother flew to California to help me with my move to New Mexico for the military. During this time, she could barely walk for long periods of time, barely eat, etc. On the night of 14 November, my mother fainted, and I took her to the emergency room. She spent five days in the hospital, with two days of that in the ICU. My mother was in kidney failure and if I had not brought her in, she would have died. My father had already been quarantining overseas, with limited contact, since October as he was working in Japan and my brother was back home in Washington. Because of the time difference, my brother was my only emotional support and we both acknowledged that we were lucky because if my mother had been back home, she would have never gone to the emergency room as my brother didn't live at home and COVID restrictions kept him from being able to see her often. After all of this, there was a change in my brother. I had seen for years my brother's light dim slowly because of all his hardships. But after our mother almost died, I saw a change in my brother and as we entered in to 2021, my brother seemed to be my brother again. Even throughout this entire process, he has kept his head up and stayed on the right track to finish school and build a better life for himself.

It can be very hard to pick yourself back up from being in a dark place and even more so when you feel you've hit rock bottom. People in these positions sometimes find coping mechanisms that leave us feeling more lost. I know that if my brother can get the treatment and support that he needs to develop proper coping mechanisms, I believe he will be able to deal with his mental health issues and personal hardships in a proper and healthy manner. That's what we, as a family and society want and need – a rehabilitated Chris whose root cause to his current issue had been dealt with in a healthy way through mental health professionals so that he can move forward responding to life's challenges, no matter how great, in a proper manner. I know that if he gets the type of mental health treatment that he needs, I have no doubt that he can be the version of my brother that I know and love.

I know that this decision before you is extremely difficult, as his sentence effects more than just him. I hope that through my words, you will be able to better understand my brother and what he has gone through. I know that the charge he was found guilty of is severe and that it mandatorily carries a minimum of 20 years, but I hope that you can see my brother's circumstances on their own and provide any leniency that you can. He needs help, not a hammer. Thank you for your time.

Respectfully,



Tracy K. Kuehner